

Linda Flint McClelland

# Skyline Drive Historic District

## A Meeting Place of Culture and Nature



*Plaque commemorating the listing of Skyline Drive Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Karlota Koester.*

**T**he Skyline Drive Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 29, 1997, encompasses the 105-mile ridgetop roadway from Front Royal to Rockfish Gap and its adjoining overlooks, way-side stations, picnic areas, and developed areas. The roadway includes the original 97 miles of Skyline Drive, built between 1931 and 1939, and the northernmost 8 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which were built in 1936-37 and transferred to Shenandoah in 1961. Significant features include the road's curvilinear alignment and adjacent slopes, 69 scenic overlooks, numerous crossings of the Appalachian Trail and remnant mountain roads, 6 picnic grounds built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) between Dickey Ridge and South River, park headquarters at Luray, remains of the CCC camp at Piney River, and the lodges and other visitor facilities at Dickey Ridge and Big Meadows. Two additional developed areas, Skyland and Lewis Mountain, have been determined eligible and will be added to the listing in the near future.

The Skyline Drive Historic District is one of an increasing number of National Register properties to illustrate the history of America's landscape as the meeting place of nature and culture. One of the most complete and extensive landscapes shaped by the CCC in the program's nine-year history, it comes under the multiple property listing

for Historic Park Landscapes in National and State Parks.<sup>2</sup> The district meets National Register criteria A and C and possesses historical significance in several ways: (1) for its association with important events in the history of American conservation and recreation; (2) as an outstanding work of naturalistic landscape design and park planning; and (3) as a showcase for the economic relief programs of the New Deal, particularly the work of the CCC.

In the 1920s, national parks engendered great local pride; and states in the East were eager to have their finest scenery become national treasures. Automobile touring was just beginning to be embraced as a favorite American pastime, offering new opportunities for regional tourism and outdoor recreation. Concerns for vanishing natural resources and the need for regional cooperation and planning to protect them were beginning to emerge in the East, and the Appalachian Mountains were viewed as one of the few remaining strongholds of natural wealth. To many, Northern Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains offered an ideal location for a national park. Forests, shrubs, flowers, streams, cascades, and prominent peaks abounded; opportunities for fishing and camping and wildlife protection were numerous; and the area was within a day's drive of 40 million people.

Shenandoah National Park was authorized in May 1926; by 1931, the drive was envisioned as an important link in an eastern network of park-to-park highways that extended from the nation's capital to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. In 1933, plans were in place to extend Skyline Drive north to Front Royal and south to Jarman Gap and to build a 500-mile parkway that would connect it to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Under the administration of President Herbert Hoover (an avid angler who had built his own fishing retreat in the area), construction began near Skyland in 1931 with funding from the Emergency

*When Skyline Drive was completed in 1939, park landscape architect Harvey Benson described the mountain motorway: "Macadamized and smooth with easy gradient and wide sweeping curves, the Drive unfolds to view innumerable panoramas of lofty peaks, forested ravines and the patchwork patterns of valley farms."<sup>1</sup>*



Known as Roosevelt's "Tree Army," the CCC transplanted and planted native trees, shrubs, and other plants along Skyline Drive. The CCC planted the roadsides, picnic grounds, and islands that screened the overlooks from the drive and maintained nurseries at the Front Royal entrance and Big Meadows.

Construction Act of 1931. The design and construction of Skyline Drive and Mary's Rock Tunnel were carried out through the National Park Service's 1926 interbureau agreement with the Bureau of Public Roads and reflected the highest engineering standards. The first section, between Thornton Gap and Hawksbill Peak, opened October 22, 1932. Construction continued through the 1930s with the impetus provided by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs. The entire central section opened in 1934, the northern section in 1936, and the southern section in 1939.

The road's design and construction adhered to the 1918 statement of policy that called for "particular attention" in the "construction of roads, trails, buildings, and other improvements" to the "harmonizing of these improvements with the landscape." Principles for scenery preservation and naturalistic landscape design, which had been developed for western park roads, were adapted to the gentler topography of the southern Appalachians and the creation of a park landscape designed especially for automobile touring. Distinguishing design characteristics include the graceful curvilinear alignment; the rounded, flattened, and planted slopes of native trees and shrubs that blended the road with the surrounding topography and enhanced the drive's scenic beauty; the development of picturesque parking overlooks at frequent intervals to present a sequence of panoramic views and provided access to the Appalachian Trail and spur trails leading to waterfalls, springs, scenic viewpoints, and virgin stands of trees; and waysides and developed areas placed at regular intervals along the drive to provide facilities for picnicking, camping, and other visitor services.

Skyline Drive had many builders. The landscape architects of the National Park Service



selected the best route for scenery and panoramic vistas. The engineers and contractors of the Bureau of Public Roads designed the mountain road to lay lightly on the land and attain the highest engineering standards. Marcellus Wright Jr., a Richmond architect, designed the lodges, cabins, and wayside stations for the park concessionaire, using native materials and rustic principles of design. Laborers, many unemployed farm workers, built guardwalls

of native stone for daily wages. By far the largest group to shape this rich legacy were the several thousand (more than 6,500) 18-to-25-year-old enrollees of the CCC who, from May of 1933 to July 1942, spent six months to two years in one or more of Shenandoah's 10 CCC camps learning and practicing the skills of landscape conservation, trail-building, and rustic construction.

Because of its proximity to Washington, DC, and its embodiment of the New Deal, Skyline Drive quickly became a showcase for the work of the CCC, which was authorized by

Hazel Mountain Overlook featured a dramatic outcropping of granodiorite. CCC enrollees removed soil from the base of the outcropping to exaggerate its picturesque character and built a guardwall and steps of native stone to create an inviting viewpoint from which park visitors could enjoy the panorama of dark hollows and farmlands below.



the Federal Unemployment Relief Act of March 31, 1933. The park's camps were among the first in the nation to be organized in May 1933. President Roosevelt visited the camps at Skyland and Big Meadows in August 1933. In the national broadcast of the park's dedication at Big Meadows in July 1936, FDR took the opportunity to praise the monumental achievement of the CCC, thus not only recognizing their hand in the making of Skyline Drive but also promoting his own desire to continue the CCC program and even make it a permanent federal agency.

Outstanding woodsmanship and workmanship make the Skyline Drive Historic District one of the finest examples of naturalistic landscape design and park planning in the nation. The CCC followed design principles that had been formulated by the landscape architects of the National Park Service the previous decade, often reviving the 19th-century practices of landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing and park builder Frederick Law Olmsted. Under the supervision of landscape architects and landscape foremen, some of whom were known as "LEMS" and knew the mountains, woods, and local building practices, CCC enrollees carried out a variety of tasks. They flattened and rounded the slopes along the newly constructed roadway, planting the slopes with native mountain laurel and filling the interstices of rock cuts with Virginia creeper. They cleared dead chestnut from the woodlands and former pastures to prevent forest fires and improve the park's scenic beauty. They fashioned rustic guardwalls, naturalistic stone stairways, rock gardens, and dry-

laid retaining walls from moss and lichen-covered boulders as they built overlooks, picnic areas, and trails. With chestnut from the former fields and woodlands hewn into logs or sawn into planks, they fashioned picnic shelters, entrance stations, comfort stations, maintenance shops, guard rails, and even water fountains.

The legacy of the CCC endures today at Shenandoah National Park in both the built resources and the regenerating forests that draw motorists from their automobiles to experience the out-of-doors. National Register listing is just the beginning of the park's commitment to stewardship, which—through research, interpretation, and wise resource management—will ensure that the park remains the meeting place of culture and nature and that the legacy of the CCC continues to inspire generations yet to come.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Harvey P. Benson, "The Skyline Drive: A Brief History of a Mountaintop Motorway," *The Regional Review* 4(2): 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Documentation for the Skyline Drive Historic District was compiled by the Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology at West Virginia University; Robinson Associates of Washington, DC, and NPS's Denver Service Center.

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